

Rembrandt's Bathsheba: the dark shadow of the left breast

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Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669) was arguably without peer as a portrait artist, and ranks among the master painters of all time. This paper concerns his portrait of 'Bathsheba at her toilet', painted in 1654 with his *de facto* wife Hendrickje Stoffels as the model.

Rembrandt's first love was Saskia van Uylenburgh whom he married in 1634 at the age of 22. She had four children with Rembrandt, Rumbartus (1635), Cornelia (1638), and Cornelia (1640) all of whom died as infants. The fourth child, Titus (1641), survived but his mother died nine months later aged less than 30, of consumption. Rembrandt recorded the gradual weakening and physical deterioration of Saskia, principally in drawings.

Geertge Dirckx, a widow, entered Rembrandt's household five months after Saskia's death. She was a nurse, loving and untiring in her employment as Titus' nanny but later becoming Rembrandt's *de facto* wife. She care for and loved Rembrandt but lost the battle with his memory of Saskia. In 1649, employing underhand methods including connivance with her brother, Rembrandt had Geertge committed to a reformatory for 12 years on the grounds of moral delinquency. Several portraits of Geertge are recorded but none had the feeling of his earlier works of Saskia.

Later in 1649, Hendrickje Stoffels, a twenty-three-year old, entered the life and home of Rembrandt, then forty-three years of age. She became his servant, mistress, and housekeeper. She, of the three women in his life, became closest to Rembrandt. He trusted her completely and she returned tenderness, kindness, and warmth. She bore him his second surviving child Cornelia (again) who was born in 1654. Rembrandt never painted a formal portrait of Hendrickje though various of his subjects are said to have been modelled by her.

The painting of 'Bathsheba at her toilet' (Fig. 1) was inspired by the story in the book of Samuel in the Old Testament. Briefly, the story relates how King David saw a woman bathing, found out she was Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, committed adultery with her and then arranged

for her husband to be killed in battle. 'David sent a messenger and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her.'

Hendrickje was the model for Bathsheba. In 1654 when it was painted she and Rembrandt were in trouble with the Church over their cohabitation and Hendrickje was pregnant with Cornelia. In the portrait, Rembrandt has softened the harsh Patriarchal brutality of the biblical story. Bathsheba's summons has come in the form of a note which she ponders while naked with a servant washing her feet. She is lost in thought. Her expression is of sorrow and resignation rather than pleasure. The body is solid and rounded yet the grim mood of the face dominates the canvas.

X-ray studies show that the face was painted and repainted many times before Rembrandt achieved the precise melancholy of the final canvas. Although Rembrandt rarely painted nudes this portrait of Bathsheba is said to be the most touching nude in the history of art.

The reasons for painting his greatest love so enigmatically sad may be obvious. Others have speculated that troubles with the Church, his impending bankruptcy (1656), and her pregnancy may all be reasons. Closer examination (Fig. 2) of the portrait reveals another possible reason. In painting her left breast, Rembrandt has shown us skin discolouration, distortion of symmetry with axillary fullness (Fig. 3), and peau d'orange. These features in a painting by the old master cannot be anything but a deliberate depiction of what he saw. They are clinical signs of breast cancer. Hendrickje lived in fact for nearly nine years after the painting of Bathsheba. There was a physical deterioration throughout this period, particularly towards the end when her general ill health became apparent in other paintings. In 1662 she was very weak and unable to talk when she began preparations for the end which came in 1663. Historians record that she was probably consumptive, dying of tuberculosis. Is it more reasonable to suggest that she died of disseminated breast cancer?



Rembrandt's 'Bathsheba at her toilet' reproduced by permission of the Musée du Louvre, Paris